

THE AMERICAN GIRL AND HER FAULTS.

Of the Royal Asiatic Society,
American Oriental Society.

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A CERTAIN superficiality of culture and information—a proneness to reach out for “results” without sharing in the arduous process which produces them—an impatience of discipline, be it that of uniform, persistent intellectual work or that of domestic control—a thirst for constant change and excitement, mostly under the form known as “pleasure”—with an excessive desire to be “up to date” in all things, and, as a consequence, bondage to reigning “fads”—these are, in my experience, perhaps the most ingrained and least superable failings of the average American girl; the girl with indulgent parents of moderate means, who is left free to follow the bent of her nature or fancies and the lead of times and surroundings usually remote from the fantastic promptings of great wealth and the depressing compulsion of harsh necessities.

I have had to make my instruction almost entirely oral. I came to it by degrees. I found that tasks were seldom done, never satisfactorily; independent work—under guidance, but requiring bona fide individual thinking—was not to be thought of—with exceptions, of course. The only thing to do was to administer as much carefully prepared nourishment as could be taken in the brief hours actually spent with me. It was relished and a good deal of it was absorbed.

What was the cause of this? Laziness? Not exactly. Incapacity? Oh, dear no! The average American girl is cleverer, brighter, quicker than her European sister. No. “There never was time.” There were always a thousand things to do, and when there was the choice between a task and an invitation to drive, a flying trip to the country, a table to be taken charge of at a church fair, a matinee party or the like, the task went to the wall. So in the end the average European woman turns out better grounded, knows more and better than her brighter American sister.

And then there are some things of slow growth, which absolutely require the old-fashioned process of persevering, indefatigable, “pegging.” Such are languages. There is no royal road to them. A language cannot be put, whole or piecemeal, into your head. You cannot catch it en passant. You have to acquire it, doing the work yourself, every bit. And real, uncompromising work it is, too, not always too amusing. There is a good deal of drudgery about it, unless you are a linguistic genius—and there are such—and languages “come to you.” This is why, while many American women can read understandingly one or two foreign languages, so few can speak, let alone write, even one with any degree of ease and correctness.

For if there is one thing which the American girl—and woman—loathes and dreads, it is anything that comes—or that she thinks comes—under the head of drudgery; also giving much time to one thing. You show her a beautiful piece of needlework which you are beginning and which, of course, you take genuine pride in. Ten to one this is what you hear. “It is lovely. But what a lot of work! How long is it going to take you?” Oliver Wendell Holmes says somewhere that this is the true key to the immense popularity of impressionist art methods in this country.

To gather the fruit without the trouble of cultivating the tree is the avowed or unconscious wish. It is amusing how often you are innocently asked to give, in a few minutes, the results of a lifetime’s study. Hence the popularity of the so-called “parlor lectures” on every imaginable topic. I have frequently heard this remark: “What a delightful way of absorbing knowledge! To have somebody else do the work, and just get the result, the essence!”

I shall never forget the letter I once received from one of “my girls” during a vacation visit with friends in another city. It was brief and ecstatic. It evidently summed up her ideal of a delightful life. In fact, she did use the very

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word. She wrote: “I am having an ideal time. I have been here a week, and on the go every minute of it. Not alone an hour!” “On the go!” and “Never alone!” How on earth, by what known process of heredity, environment, etc., could such an ideal have been framed?

But the story has another side. This same girl, very soon after that memorable vacation, was involved in one of those rapid domestic catastrophes so frequent in this country. There was ruin, sickness, death. No “ideal times” any more for her, poor girl! But her power to keep “on the go” stood her in good stead. She was nurse, housekeeper, comforter, everything. She buckled to and worked, and earned money, always bright, always cheerful, with her heart half breaking most of the time, her strength on the verge of collapse. She married since, and became a specimen of the noblest American womanhood, with all the girl alive in her, but subdued and sobered. At this very moment I know a girl of seventeen, who, for two years, has been housekeeper, not in play, but in earnest, with all the duties and responsibilities of the office, for an invalid mother and a busy father in poor health, keeping at the head of her school all the time and taking private lessons besides. Yet she is as fond of excitement and “pleasure” as any of them.

And such cases—such seeming inconsistencies—are, to my certain knowledge, by no means rare. It is because the failings and foibles which I have endeavored briefly to sketch are really only surface faults; to use old-fashioned, but always graphic language—faults of the head, not of the heart. The typical American girl, no doubt, is frivolous, superficial, undisciplined. But let her find herself face to face with life in its seriousness, its solemnity, its tragedy, let duty appeal to her through her affections, through her principles, which are universally high, strong, even severe—and she answers the call, is equal to it, and triumphantly vindicates her real self, her truly noble, often exquisite, nature.

The worst of it is, she makes herself, in her coltish days, so much worse than she ever really is, at her worst; and her faults, if they do not lie deep, are unfortunately glaring, just the kind to strike strangers and blind them to her real worth. She does not do herself justice, more’s the pity. All the same, we that know the American girl and woman intimately, will always find more to love and admire than to criticize, and we need not fear that all these “new woman” vagaries should permanently injure or spoil her. Besides that word itself, “new woman,” is only the coining of the hour, and does not ring true; until a new way of bearing and nursing children is invented, there will be no new woman—a wiser woman, a stronger, a healthier, there will be, but not a “new” woman.

And now, should any of my readers be inclined to resent my criticisms on the ground that I am, after all, a foreigner—well, I took out my naturalization papers years ago.

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